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~ **Insight meditation: A review**

Insight (vipassana) meditation is the moment-to-moment examination of the body and mind with calm and focused attention.

This practice brings us directly in touch with our experience. It helps us live more fully in the present instead of being lost in thoughts, images, regrets, and fears about the past and future.

As our minds become less distracted, we begin to see things more clearly.

We begin to see that the bare experience of sight, sound, sensation, and thought is one thing, and what we make out of that bare experience is another.

We begin to see that our happiness and suffering do not lie "out there" in the experience but are found instead within our own minds, in how we relate to experience.

We begin to see the truth that "all things are changing" in a much deeper way, so that we stop trying to hold onto things.

We see we are not who we thought we were. Our sense of separateness begins to dissolve.

Loving kindness meditation, practiced alongside vipassana, develops this new sense of connection into a powerful force for healing and well-being.

As it becomes easier to let go, to let life "live itself," we gain abiding happiness and peace.

Our wisdom leads to spontaneous compassion for the relief of all suffering beings, including ourselves.

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~ What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the moment-to-moment observation, with calm attention, of whatever is happening within the body and the mind.

We all have the ability to be aware in this way.

This non-judgmental and non-interfering observation is one of the keys to unlock patterns of suffering.

Practice strengthens our mindfulness into a powerful tool that can cut through deeply ingrained habits that cause suffering.

Mindfulness helps us learn how to relate to things differently, without reacting in habitual ways to what is pleasant or unpleasant.

This practice helps purify the mind from the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion, which the Buddha identified as the causes of all our suffering.

As the practice deepens, calmness and clarity lead to liberating insight into the facts of existence (vipassana) and greater freedom from suffering.

Techniques for developing mindfulness derive from one of the most famous discourses of the Buddha called The Foundations of Mindfulness (the Satipatthana Sutta). The many methods of practice are rooted in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition of Southeast Asia. Within this larger tradition, diverse styles of practice have developed over the centuries, such as the mental noting technique made popular in the 1940's by the Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma.

Mindfulness meditation is concerned with only one thing: the liberation of the heart and mind from suffering.

The wisdom and compassion that come through this practice are of benefit not just to ourselves but to everyone.

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~ Specific Practices

Insight meditation begins with developing calmness of mind by practicing presence or mindfulness. We focus the mind on specific aspects of normal experience, known as primary objects of attention. Virtually anything can be a primary object. In practice, it has been found that some objects are more helpful than others.

Sitting

In sitting meditation, we start by focusing the attention on the actual physical sensations of the breath coming in and out of the body.

Walking

During walking meditation, we keep the attention on the movement and touch sensations of the legs and feet.

Eating

We can make eating another meditation, with the primary object being the taste sensations. Since we often eat while doing other things such as reading or talking to other people, retreat gives us a chance to eat with less distraction.

Developing continuity of attention is very important.

True mindfulness practice is not limited to formal periods of sitting and walking but can be extended into more and more of our activities during the day.

Physically slowing down helps keep us more grounded in our bodies, and lessens the distracting effect of fast-moving thoughts.

All of these practices aim to develop the calmness that unveils our capacity to experience things as they really are. This direct experience leads to genuine happiness, to freedom from suffering.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.OpenDharma.org)

~ Basic Sitting

- Sit comfortably, with the head, neck, and chest in a relatively straight line.
- Be relaxed yet alert.
- Be directly aware of the physical sensations of the body while you are sitting: the contact your body makes with the cushion or bench.
- Breathe naturally. There is no need to control the breath in any special way.
- It can be helpful to begin by becoming aware of sounds as they come and go
- Notice the difference between the bare experience of hearing and any thoughts or images that may be triggered by the sound. Notice how you don't have to make an effort to hear as long as you pay attention.
- Then, after some time, let the sounds be in the background and bring your attention back into your body, to the breath.
- Be directly aware of the physical sensations of the breath, either at the nostrils, in the throat or chest, or in the belly.
- Use soft mental notes such as "in" and "out" or "rising" and "falling," if it helps you stay in touch with the breath. The note is a pointer or reminder to you of the direct experience of the breath and not a substitute for it.
- Think of the breath as your home. Whenever you become aware that your mind has wandered away from it, simply return home, again and again.

There are two general methods for keeping the attention focused on the breath. You can either settle back and relax, letting the sensations come to you as if you were listening to sounds, or you can make more of an active effort to connect and sustain your attention.

One or the other method will be appropriate at different times.

Remember: the heart of meditation practice is the ability to begin again, no matter how often your mind wanders.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.OpenDharma.org)

~ Walking Meditation

Sustaining awareness of the physical sensations in the legs and feet while walking helps bring interest and openness into everyday life.

Choose a flat place about ten meters long to walk back and forth.

Simply experience the changing textures, temperatures, weights, densities, vibrations, and so on. The main focus is on the soles of the feet, as you walk back and forth at a normal or slow pace. Slowing down can allow concentration on more subtle sensations.

Just enjoy one step at a time, as if you had all the time in the world.

Notice that it is self-defeating to set goals such as, "I will be with every step till the end of my line." That thought is already a break in the simple meeting with physical sensations--and besides is an unlikely goal to be fulfilled!

If you are distracted, pause at the end of each "lap," close the eyes, and reconnect before turning around.

Some people find that the "noting technique" helps concentration: keep most of the attention on the physical sensations while allowing words such as "lifting, moving, placing," to describe the movement of the feet. If the words take up too much attention, then please drop the noting.

Whenever possible, be alert for the subtle "urge" or "intention" to turn the body around, just before actually turning. It can be possible, to expand this alertness to the intentions to lift, move, or place a foot. Awareness of intentions gives more space between unconscious urges and following through on them.

Let this practice come into your daily life.

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~ Eating Meditation

As with sitting and walking, eating is a basic activity that we easily take for granted.

We often eat while doing other things such as talking or reading. We can learn a lot about the mind by eating without distractions and making it as much of a meditation practice as sitting and walking.

- After you have sat down with your meal, begin the meditation by noticing the smell of the food and any pleasant feeling associated with it.
- Notice the intention to move your hand and take the food. Move more slowly than normal. It can help to close your eyes as you begin to chew.
- Chew more slowly than usual. Notice the burst of flavor that comes after you take the first bite. Keep chewing slowly. What happens to the taste sensations as you keep chewing?
- Be aware of the intention to swallow the food. Also, notice if there is an intention to take more food even though you might still have some in your mouth.
- Use the mental noting technique to stay aware of the taste and what happens to it as you keep chewing.
- You can label the sensations as salty, sweet, sour, hot, and so on.
- Also, notice if there is any difference in the intensity of the taste depending upon whether you are breathing in or breathing out.
- Finally, pay attention to the signals from your stomach and your tongue as you approach the point of being full. Notice how these signals can be at odds with each other.

Eating meditation can reveal a lot about how we relate to pleasant experiences. Liberation is experiencing what is pleasant without being gripped by the force of greed, one of the root causes of all suffering.

Eating meditation helps us realize that freedom.

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~ **Mental noting**

This method uses concepts as skillful means for developing concentration, and helps us frame our experience by being able to label or name what is going on.

Advantages of this technique

Reminds us of the primary object of attention.

Helps cut through daydreams about the past and the future.

Reveals the underlying emotion with which we are relating to our experience.

Reveals the sense of "I" as something extra added onto bare experience.

Specific Instructions

-Keep the mental label light and transparent. Be careful not to make the note so loud that it drowns out the actual experience.

-Remember it is simply a pointer or a reminder and not meant to substitute for the experience itself.

-Think of putting 95% of your attention on whatever you are experiencing and 5% on the labeling of it.

-With thinking, it is helpful to distinguish thoughts about the past and future with the labels "remembering" and "planning," respectively. Such labels are very useful in freeing us from being lost in the content of our experience and instead coming to a greater understanding of it as a process.

-In formal practice, the most common notes are "in," "out" or "rising," "falling" for the sitting meditation, depending upon where you feel the breath most clearly, and "left," "right" or "lifting," "moving," "placing" for the walking meditation, depending upon the speed of your walking.

-Drop in a mental note occasionally as a reminder during periods of non-formal practice, for example, while eating.

-Keep the timing of the note correct, not too soon and not too late.

-Extend the noting to routine activities usually performed out of habit, where you seldom bring awareness to your actions. Examples might be walking to the bathroom, putting on or washing your clothes, bathing, or brushing your teeth. Extend the noting to include intentions and the resultant movement of the body before dramatic changes in body posture.

-Mental notes such as "intending," "reaching," "touching," "intending," "standing," or "intending" can help ground our awareness in our bodies and extend the sense of wakefulness beyond the boundaries of formal sitting and walking periods.

-The mental note of "seeing" can be particularly helpful in counteracting the tendency of our attention to rush out through the eyes and get lost in the external world.

-The mental note of "hearing" can likewise keep us from getting lost in habitual reactions to sounds.

Mental noting reveals what our experience is, how we relate to it, and what happens to it when we become aware of it.

It helps us to see the basic characteristics of impermanence, unreliability, and lack of independent existence that all things share.

Do things change when we pay close attention to them? How do they change?

What is our relationship to these changing experiences?

These questions lead to a fundamental shift in our understanding of freedom.

Remember that mental noting is simply a tool.

Know when to use it and when to let it go.

Noting is unnecessary when mindfulness is strong and continuous or when the objects being attended to are too numerous or rapid in appearance to note precisely.

In that case, a general note (such as "thinking," instead of trying to note the specific kinds of thoughts) can be helpful.

It is always possible, if mindfulness is strong enough, to be fully aware of an experience even though you may not be able to note it.

When noting is used properly, it leads to the realization of no-self (anatta), the crown jewel of the Buddha's teaching, as we come to understand directly that there are experiences but no-one to whom they refer.

As the Buddha said in the Bahiya Sutta, "Just this is the end of suffering."

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.OpenDharma.org)

~ **Body sensation**

As you try to stay with the sensations of the breath, you will begin to be aware of mental reactions to physical sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant. When there are pleasant sensations, you might develop a long fantasy about how close you are to a “big experience.” When there are unpleasant sensations, you might convince yourself that you will never be able to meditate, and in fact need to go to a hospital.

Your attention will naturally be drawn away from the sensations of the breath to other sensations in your body, especially pain.

It is important to learn to be steady through uncomfortable sensations. Sitting still contributes greatly to peace of mind.

It is equally important not to cultivate a tendency towards strain by forcing yourself to sit through unbearable pain.

Be patient and kind to yourself. You will learn when to sit still and when to move.

~ Bring some interest to the actual physical sensations. What do you notice about the sensations when you bring your awareness to it?

~ See if you can tell the difference between pain as a sensation in your body and the reaction to it in your mind: the unpleasant feeling-tone, the thoughts, etc.

~ It can help to label the sensation with the noting technique. Words like “burning,” “tingling,” “cutting,” or “twisting” describe the sensation more clearly than the general word, “pain”.

~ If the pain gets more intense, try relaxing more on the out-breath and breathing into the pain. Or you can try “sweeping” your attention through your body from the top of your head to your toes.

~ Feel free to change position if the pain becomes unbearable.

~ You may sometimes experience pain not as something solid but as changing, flowing sensations.

~ As soon as the sensation no longer draws your attention away, return to the sensations of the breath.

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~ Feeling-tone (vedana)

Feeling-tone (vedana in Pali) is the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness that we experience whenever we see, hear, touch, smell, taste, or think. Feeling-tone can also be neither pleasant nor unpleasant but somewhere in-between ("neutral").

Our practice is to be aware of pleasant feelings without desperately trying to make them last when they go away. Our practice is also to be aware of unpleasant feelings without struggling to get rid of them when they come. We can also learn to be aware of neutral feelings without being bored or restless. Letting feelings come and go by themselves and simply staying aware of them without getting caught up in them, we weaken the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion that are the causes of all suffering. Our practice then leads directly to an abiding happiness and peace.

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~ Mind-state (emotion)

Like colored glasses that can affect our vision, mind-states, or emotions, can affect our experience. The world appears very different when we are angry and when we are at ease.

Mind-states can be either wholesome, like generosity and kindness, or unwholesome, like fear and cruelty. All unwholesome mind-states can be traced back to greed, hatred, and delusion, the roots of all suffering.

Mind-states are like clouds passing through the "sky" of our minds. Some appear dark and stormy; others are light and fluffy. They are all visitors to our awareness. We do not invite them. They come and go by themselves.

Whether the mind-states are pleasant or unpleasant, our practice is the same: being aware of them as changing, passing experiences, not solid, not able to be grasped.

Our entire task in meditation is not to "identify" with mind-states or anything else that is changing. This means not claiming mind-states as "me" or "mine", not "owning" them.

Notice also how body sensations, feeling-tones, and mind-states interact in your experience.

By practicing in this way, we continue to weaken the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion and experience the mind's natural radiance and peace, unaffected by whatever is coming and going.

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~ **The five hindrances to calmness & insight**

The five hindrances are mind-states that often appear when awareness comes close to something painful or powerful in the psyche. They could be called “five signs of breakthrough.”

Desire ~ Recognize it in your mind as wanting, expecting, or a sense that something is missing.

Notice what triggers the sense that what you are experiencing is not good enough, that something more should be happening. Notice any sense of "rushing" to the next thing.

Be aware of the feeling of contraction in the body and mind when you are in the grip of this force. Also notice the relief when there is no wanting.

Aversion ~ Understand that all the different kinds of aversion are simply responses to an unpleasant feeling. Examples of aversion are: anger, fear, judgment, irritation, and boredom.

~ Don't judge yourself for aversion; this only adds more aversion on top of what's there already.

~ Investigate the aversion. Open up to it. Greet it with loving kindness, which is its opposite.

~ See what lies underneath it. Often a feeling of being hurt or of righteous indignation underlies anger. When that underlying feeling is acknowledged, the anger often subsides by itself.

Sloth and torpor (sleepiness, dullness, lethargy) ~ There are three basic kinds of sleepiness. First, our modern body and mind understand lack of external stimulation as a signal that it is time to go to sleep. With time we learn to be alert in a silent setting. Second, many of us have a lot of accumulated tiredness. In this case, rest and then come to the formal meditations with more lightness. Third, sleep that comes as an avoidance is worth shaking off:

~ To rouse energy: open your eyes, stand, take deeper in-breaths, do more walking meditation.

~ Investigate! What does sleepiness actually feel like? Can we learn to be present with it simply as a body sensation? Pay careful, close attention and use precise mental noting. Don't let sleepiness keep you from being awake and alert. Greet it with energy and see if it lasts.

Restlessness (remorse, agitation, worry) ~ This is the opposite of sleepiness: too much energy. We feel as if we are going to "jump out of our skin." Can we find a way to hold this energy?

~ Make a resolution to sit as still as possible for a short time and see what happens to the restlessness. Does it decrease or increase? Can we learn how to "ride it out" as if it were a whirlwind passing through?

~ Bring attention to the breath and keep it there as much as you can, for short periods at a time.

~ If these techniques don't seem to be working, you can try doing the opposite: expand your attention outward. Listen to sounds. Walk outside. See if you can make your mind as big as the sky and let the restlessness move through it.

Doubt ~ This is often the most difficult hindrance. We need to recognize it right away or it can stop our practice. We can doubt the teachings, the teachers, or ourselves. Self-doubt (“I can’t meditate” or “I’m worse than when I started”) can violently undermine us.

~ Notice how it makes us step back and not get involved. See it as another passing experience.

~ Sustain attention on a simple, direct experience, like the breath, the body, or hearing a sound. In that experience, doubt is dispelled.

With all the hindrances, Recognition is the first step. Then come Acceptance, Interest, and Non-Identification ("RAIN").

The hindrances are not our true nature. They come and they go. Can we stay steady with them?

If so, they can be transformed from hindrances into doorways to liberation, and we may be able to understand the words of Ramana Maharshi:

“There are no obstacles to meditation. That very thought is the obstacle.”

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~ Thought

It can be intimidating to hear about “observing thought” because thoughts are subtle and slippery. We can’t touch thoughts. But very often, unnoticed thoughts force us to react mechanically to life, and remove us from fresh experience in the present. Bringing attention to thoughts allows us to know the difference between repetitive or borrowed thought and genuine wisdom.

We have already observed our thoughts many times: for example, when we catch ourselves daydreaming, or notice that our point of view differs from another person’s.

What happens to thoughts when we bring attention to them? Sometimes they simply disappear. Sometimes we may wonder if we are being aware of thoughts or just thinking about them. Sometimes as we plan a trip or remember an argument, we know clearly that we are seeing images and hearing or seeing language in our minds, and that “movie” continues.

Our practice is to:

~ Pay attention to thoughts without getting lost in their content. Instead, we simply notice that thinking is happening in our minds. We often get lost in thoughts about the past or future. Labeling these thoughts as “remembering” or “planning” can bring us back to the present moment.

~ Learn how thoughts are connected with feelings, body sensations and emotions.

~ Investigate. Do we control our thoughts? Or do they seem to appear and disappear whether we like it or not? Thoughts are not an enemy to be killed. In fact, trying to “kill” thought simply speeds up the thinking. Instead, we can open attention to lively chaos, with discipline, deep curiosity and wisdom.

This spacious awareness gradually buys us out of slavery from cowardly views and miserly habits. We begin to be less interested in compulsive thoughts that lead to suffering, and instead we cultivate those that spring from the heart of the unknown and lead to happiness.

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~ Intention

An intention is a signal or urge in the mind to think, speak or act. Freedom does not mean acting on every impulse that comes into our minds. Recognizing destructive urges before we act gives time for wisdom to come through – maybe we don't need to pick up that third coffee/heroin needle/ to-do list or tell that person what we think. By bringing attention to intentions, we can learn to act upon some and let go of others.

~ Begin to notice the intention to move your body. If you hesitate before moving, you may be able to catch the urge to get up after a sitting, to scratch an itch, or to turn when you come to the end of your walking line. During sitting and walking meditation, notice the urge to distract yourself by moving or looking around. Sooner or later, intentions will fade away if we don't act upon them.

~ See what happens to the intention when you bring attention to it.

Riding out certain intentions untangles us from painful thoughts and actions. Letting intentions come and go by themselves can be a powerful expression of freedom.

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~ **Consciousness**

Consciousness means "knowing". It is an essential aspect of all experience.

What we really mean by experience is the "knowing" of something.

When we turn our attention toward consciousness, we don't find anything. It has no location, shape, taste, or color, yet it reveals everything.

If we want to experience it directly, we need to turn away from objects and pay attention instead to the simple fact that they are known.

When the mind is undistracted, consciousness appears clear and unobstructed.

Nothing comes between it and the known object. The undistracted mind knows things directly and immediately. Thoughts about objects always follow the direct knowing of them.

We often believe that consciousness is who we really are.

We believe we are really the watcher, or the witness that seems to be behind everything.

We say "I see" or "I think". But who is it that's actually doing the seeing and thinking? Is there really some "I" standing back behind it all, or is that just a deeply-rooted belief?

The Buddha's teaching is about not clinging to anything that is changing, no matter how refined or subtle it may be. This includes consciousness, which the Buddha said also arises and passes in connection with objects. The belief that consciousness is our true self is a subtle form of clinging in the mind.

If we cling neither to objects nor to the knowing of them, then what?

What stands revealed when there's no clinging to anything at all? This is the experience of peace, of freedom from suffering, that the Buddha meant when he called his teaching the sure heart's release.

And it is always available for each of us, at any moment. That is why each moment is worthy of our attention.

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~ Awareness without an object

Up to now, we have been making a deliberate effort to return to the breath again and again in our sitting practice. This strong effort is necessary to overcome our equally strong habit of becoming easily distracted and lost in thoughts.

However, if we have been able to remain calm and focused on the breath, we can see what happens if we let go of making any effort to direct our attention anywhere.

-Instead of choosing to return to the breath, we can let our awareness be "choice-less." We can let whatever is predominant in our experience come and go while we simply stay aware of it.

-Our attention might remain on the breath. Or it might go from one thing to another: first the breath, then a sound, another sensation, a thought, back to the breath, and so on, in succession.

-As long as we remain undistracted, we will be vividly aware of each of these changing experiences.

We may then get the sense that they are happening all by themselves. This is a powerful insight that can free us from the habit of trying to control things. It can help us drop the fear and insecurity that make us feel separate from life and allow us to experience instead a profound connection with all things. We can come to see life as a kind of magical unfolding of experiences.

If you find that you are becoming distracted or "spaced-out" during this exercise, simply return to being focused and alert by coming back to the breath or body sensations.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.OpenDharma.org)

~ **The teaching of selflessness (anata)**

In meditation we learn to distinguish between direct experience and concepts. Concepts are always about experience. Words are concepts, and we use them to indicate or point toward a direct experience. We need to be careful not to mistake words or concepts for experience itself.

We use the words "I," "me," "mine," and "self" very often. Let us ask the question:

What is the direct experience to which these words are pointing?

In our practice, we have been examining everything that makes up our body and mind: sensation, feeling-tone, thought, emotion, intention, and the consciousness that "knows" each of these. Is there anything else that we can find "behind" or "within" these various elements that is separate from them?

If we take a car apart completely, then it would be meaningless to call it a car any longer.

The word "car" is simply a convenient label for a lot of parts that are put together and that function in a certain way. It's not that some object "car" actually existed and somehow disappeared when we took "it" apart. "Car" never really existed in the first place, in the same way that the parts did. It was always just a designation that we used for the sake of convenience.

It's exactly the same for our use of the words "I," "me," "mine," and "self." These words refer to the felt sense that our experience somehow "belongs" to someone. This felt sense of self is connected to a deeply rooted belief that there really must be someone continuously "behind" it all, to whom everything happens or to which everything refers. Our own experience challenges this belief and reveals it to be just that: a belief.

The sense of self does not exist anywhere within or separate from the changing play of sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts that make up our experience. For example, if we ask the question, "Who is thinking this thought?" we do not find anyone separate from the thought itself who is actually doing the thinking. The thought thinks itself, so to speak. Our experience reveals that there is no "essence" within any of the elements of the body and mind that actually corresponds to this word "self," just as there is no essence of car hidden within the parts that we call "car."

People often glibly conclude that there's no self, period. But it is undeniable that the felt sense of self is part of our experience at times. The sense of self, which seems real enough, is arising and passing because of conditions, like anything else in this world of change.

Experience shows us that the sense of self is typically stronger when there is identification with a correspondingly strong experience in the body or mind. Thus, we naturally say, "I am angry," rather than, "There is anger arising". At other times, when one is fully engaged in an activity and the sense of separation from the world diminishes, the sense of self is not so strong. And when we are in deep sleep, the sense of self is entirely gone.

Thus, moments of "selflessness," like moments of freedom, are not as unusual as we think they are. We often let them go unnoticed.

If we pay attention to our direct experience with a calm mind, we become more familiar with moments of selflessness, so that we cease being disturbed or enchanted by them.

By becoming accustomed to this fact of existence, which has been called the "crown jewel" of the Buddha's teaching, we gain tremendous ease and freedom.

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~ About the retreats

~ The role of the teachers

The Buddha said that we should be our own refuge, our own light, that he could only point the way but that we had to walk the path of awakening for ourselves.

Teachers are only guides.

They are walking on the same path that students walk. They know some of the pitfalls and can help students avoid them or clear up confusion about them.

They can inspire students to practice, but ultimately it's the students themselves who actually have to do the work and realize the benefits of these practices.

Teachers are therefore spiritual friends who are willing to share whatever wisdom they have. This is how their teachers related to them.

The point is that no one can free another. Why is that? Because the capacity for freedom is within each of us already. We simply need to discover ways to develop it.

~ It's okay to be a beginner

These teachings and practices are actually very simple. In fact, they're almost too simple. Unfortunately, most of us have a tendency for some reason to make things complicated.

What makes the practice difficult is all the expectation and judgment that we can bring to it with our opinions and preconceptions. It's best to have as open a mind as possible and practice as wholeheartedly as we can.

You will find that your mind will wander again and again as you try to keep it focused. It doesn't matter. Having to start over again and again is essential and beneficial, not a sign of failure. Great patience and persistence are required. In the end, the benefits will be real.

As the philosopher Spinoza said, "All noble undertakings are as difficult as they are rare."

Be assured that the practice of meditation is one of the noblest of all activities. While it isn't easy, it is worth the effort.

~ The benefit of practice while on retreat

What does a retreat provide that daily life practice cannot?

A retreat environment provides conditions that can aid the development of calm and focused awareness. Silence, simplicity, and aloneness, for example, work together as powerful supports for purifying the mind.

Perhaps the most important of these conditions is silence, which can seem difficult for someone who is a beginning meditator.

It is rare indeed for us to spend any length of time being silent when we are not on retreat. But it turns out that much can be learned about the nature of suffering - and happiness - from doing so.

Also, being alone with oneself does not necessarily mean being lonely. It can be a wonderful opportunity to discover things that we might otherwise never get a chance to see in our daily lives.

~ How to develop the proper attitude for a retreat

Retreats are different from other activities. They're not about gaining anything or getting rid of anything.

They're about letting go of what's unnecessary in our lives and what blocks our natural capacity to be free.

Although we don't like to admit it, the truth is that we often do not have much control over what we experience. Once we realize this, we can begin to understand that freedom lies in changing our relationship to our experience rather than trying to change the experience itself.

The Buddha's teaching asks whether there is an alternative to trying to make pleasant experiences last and trying to make unpleasant ones go away. The efforts we make to do so, ordinarily define much of our lives and can be exhausting. Instead of being victims of these habits of greed and hatred, can we discover the power and joy that comes through their renunciation? Retreats provide an opportunity for us to do just that.

~ We do not practice just for ourselves

Often people have the feeling that meditation is a self-centered activity. But this is not accurate.

While it is true that no one can do the practice for us, during retreats we see that we can't do it alone either.

Many people are involved in creating the supportive environment of a retreat. We can feel a connection with them. This is one example of how the practice of meditation brings us more in touch with others.

Ultimately, we can begin to see that despite the many differences we have, we are all subject to remarkably similar experiences of suffering and happiness. We can then begin to have more compassion for ourselves and others. As our practice develops, our habit of referring everything back to ourselves fades. Our interest in seeing clearly brings an openness towards what is around us, a kindness towards life as it actually happens. Our hearts discover a depth of patience and understanding that allows us to be present and responsive to the living beings we encounter.

Over time, it becomes clear that meditation practice is not just for our own personal benefit.

As one teacher put it, we practice so that we may bring peace into this world. We practice so that we can contribute to the relief of suffering, for ourselves and others, in whatever way is appropriate.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.OpenDharma.org)